



## Sense of Place: An Interdisciplinary Framework

Developed by North Central Regional Educational  
Laboratory and Educators From Across the state of Iowa

During the late 1980s members of the Iowa Rural Advisory Council conceptualized the Sense of Place project and presented the idea to the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL). The Council identified a dilemma that has been confirmed by the most recent census: Iowa has been facing a population decline for the past decade.

Though education alone cannot reverse this trend, education can become a strong force in helping students understand their heritage, their role in the community, and their place in the future. A sense of pride and security in their past will give students the roots and the knowledge they need in order to plan with confidence for their future.

In a joint effort with six Area Education Agencies in Iowa (Keystone, Grant Wood, Mississippi Bend, Southern Prairie, Western Hills, and Lakeland) NCREL began to plan the Sense of Place symposium. NCREL worked to develop broad project goals, identify participants, and lay the symposium groundwork. Members of the group agreed that the format for the curriculum should be decided by the educators attending the symposium. Rather than impose concepts on the teacher-participants, NCREL would act as a facilitator, securing information and speakers while enabling the practitioners themselves to develop the curriculum. NCREL would continue to coordinate all activities through the year.

In July 1994 the Sense of Place Symposium brought together teachers, administrators, and intermediate agency personnel from across the state of Iowa. The group hoped to develop a framework for the Sense of Place curriculum. The participants, who determined the direction of the project and its goals, were professionals working on a daily basis with students—some of whom eventually will leave Iowa in search of "the better life," and some of whom will remain to help shape the future of the state.

As one participant said: "We wanted to help the young people to base their decisions on the best possible information and also give them a connectedness with their community."

The discussion concerning the rationale for the curriculum was as diverse as the communities represented. Some of the participants came from urban areas; others lived and worked in very small towns. While some of the communities were experiencing economic growth, others were encountering employment problems. Several teachers worked with children coping with emotional problems caused by family situations; other teachers experienced this problem to a much lesser degree. This diversity gave the sense of place concept even more validity because it resonated with all the participants regardless of where they lived, what grade level they taught, or what experience they brought to the symposium.

The theme that emerged from the symposium was that this curriculum could be a tool to enhance students' skills, values, and self concept

through an awareness, understanding, and appreciation of their local area. One of the teachers described it as the "global diversity nested doll approach": individual fi family fi school fi community fi world. A Sense of Place framework, as envisioned at the symposium, is a multifaceted approach to learning that acknowledges the value, distinctive characteristics, and needs of each student and community.

With these concepts in mind, participants developed a general curriculum framework that is appropriate and meaningful to each possible site. It involves: a statement of purpose, objectives, general topics, and proposed outcomes to be achieved by Sense of Place. The advantage of this structure is that it does not impose another activity on teachers, but is imbedded in the existing curriculum while also enriching and expanding it. At its best the Sense of Place curriculum is interdisciplinary and continually enhances the learning environment by using the students' own lives as a point of reference. It thus ensures meaningful learning.

An interwoven partnership linking the school, community, and students lies at the heart of the Sense of Place curriculum. This partnership helps young people develop a sense of appreciation for their heritage, stewardship for their area, and empowerment for their future. While each partner figured prominently in the goals, topics, and outcomes of the curriculum, the teacher's role is that of catalyst whose responsibility is to create an environment that encourages sharing between the community and its young citizens.

The curriculum framework that follows is a guide for developing specific lessons that reflect the uniqueness of each setting. The lessons that evolved are based on the interests/needs of the learners, research resources available, community resources/ needs, and the educational environment. This approach takes into account that a valuable and exciting lesson in Sioux City may not be at all appropriate or feasible in Douds. Sense of Place is meant to provide teachers with a focus for their instruction and a vehicle with which to include others in the learning process.

The following purpose statement is the lens through which the project should be viewed:

"A Sense of Place, for an individual, is a connection between where you are and where you came from, which leads to where you will go. When explored through education and when involving communal dialogue and local resources, this connection will result in the students, school staff, and community developing an awareness, appreciation, and stewardship for their area."

**NOTE: Study units generated by the "Sense of Place" Project are integrated with the lesson plans in section 3 of this binder.**

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